

Early in the summer of 1968, a very unassuming and somewhat strange album appeared. On the cover was what appeared to be a child's painting. On the rear cover was a small picture of the back of a fairly ugly, somewhat suburban-looking pink house and in large bold letters were the words: Music From Big Pink. On the spine, the group was listed as The Band, but on the label of the disc itself were only the musicians' names. The inside of this gatefold album was equally mysterious. A repeated picture of the house, with a strangely-worded paragraph, a listing of the musicians, but not what they played and a black and white photo of them in the mountains where they looked like outlaws from the previous century. Opposite was a bright, garish color photograph titled "Next of Kin" (a quote from the song "Wheels On Fire") of them standing with a bunch of relatives on someone's farm.

Looking real close at the fine print, one could discover that the cover painting was not by a child at all, but by Bob Dylan. This group was once known as The Hawks and three years before they backed Bob Dylan on his tumultuous 1965 through 1966 world tour, but nothing had been heard from them since.

This almost anonymous album would very quickly influence and change the direction of rock and roll and popular music. The first people it affected were other musicians. Eric Clapton heard it and decided to abandon Cream in search of something closer to his roots. Soon, all kinds of major groups stopped what they were doing and started getting back to the music they first played, or paying attention to things like harmony and acoustic guitars or even playing of all things country music.

The funny thing about all this was The Band did not play country music though they let you know they could. The Band did not play blues, but something in their sound let you know they could. And The Band certainly

weren't folksingers though there was something in this music that was as old as the oldest ballad. And The Band certainly weren't psychedelic mindbenders though three quarters of the way through the album there was a song as strange and mind-bending as anything coming out of San Francisco or England.

Now finally, *Music From Big Pink* and its four successors are available in brand new remastered versions on compact disc sounding the way they're supposed to sound with the remaining Band albums soon to follow. It only took Capitol Records about ten years to do it properly. The albums have been available on CD but the previous editions were mastered sloppily and in the case of their third album, *Stage Fright* didn't even have the mixes of the original LP.

The key to The Band's sound was right in the title of the first album, the word music. These guys were musicians, and every song on the album emphasized that fact. They weren't necessarily looking to be rock stars. They weren't catering to youth or any of the prevailing trends of the times. But the opening track left no doubt that they meant business. "Tears Of Rage," a slow, wailing, mournful ballad written by Bob Dylan and The Band's pianist, Richard Manuel who also sang it. A song so majestically powerful that as Happy Traum wrote in his review in *Sing Out! Magazine*, "You had to stop halfway through, and put the needle back at the beginning of the record." Nothing approximating the sound of that song has been heard before or since.

And that song was just the beginning. As the record progressed there were many different sounds and songs to be heard. For one thing, there was no one lead singer, there were several. And they'd sing together and switch verses tossing songs, verses, and solos back and forth as skillfully as the best basketball players. This was a band that knew what the word band

meant, and also knew how to work as an ensemble. The sound was controlled, yet spontaneous and full of mystery as were the lyrics to the songs. And those lyrics were never of the “I love you/You don’t love me” variety or anything close. They were stories, and often those stories had no real beginning or end, and left a lot to the listener’s imagination. Some were steeped in myth, or had religious overtones and sometimes the characters seemed familiar though you could never quite place them. Lyrically the album seemed in tandem with the spirit of Dylan’s *John Wesley Harding*, released at the beginning of the year. And when those songs were put together with the bootlegged “Basement Tapes,” a collaboration of Dylan and the Band that started surfacing the following year on reel-to-reel tapes, one had to wonder just what was going on in those misty New York mountains.

Of the two songwriters, pianist, Richard Manuel was the more direct and personal. Amazingly poetic, always sad, singing with every bit of feeling he could possibly muster, he was the lost dreamer somewhere in the clouds, full of longing, hearing voices, never able to make what he wanted to happen.

Guitarist Robbie Robertson was the storyteller. He’d spent the off-hours of the ’66 tour working on new songs with Dylan. He obviously knew he was working with and learning from a master. He paid close attention and learned his lessons well. His most Dylanesque song and perhaps The Band’s most famous, “The Weight” remains the direct evidence of this. The song’s protagonist keeps wandering into situations where someone is always asking some sort of favor that is apparently never returned starting out by pulling into Nazareth and you’re never sure whether it’s the Nazareth of Christ or Nazareth, Pennsylvania.

The Dylan songs as well have this mystery, whether the collaborations (“Tears of Rage” with Manuel, “Wheels On Fire” with Danko) or the self-penned “I Shall Be Released.” Is “Tears” really about a father and a daughter? Who is the singer talking to in “Wheels” and is “Released” really just about a prisoner?

None of these and any other of the questions the songs on *Big Pink* asked were ever really answered and it is probably one of the reasons that it sounds as fresh as it did 32 years ago.

The group on *Big Pink* had a totally different sound than the one that backed Dylan only two years before. Behind Dylan they played loud, furious, raging rock and roll steeped in blues. It was all or nothing and rarely had time for subtlety. Dylan, the impatient trailblazer always had a let’s just play it and whatever comes out comes out attitude. Other than perhaps a guitar or drum intro to kick off a song, he never had time for detailed arrangements. Also since Dylan held down the rhythm on guitar, it allowed Robertson, Hudson and Manuel the freedom to improvise wildly which they did.

On *Big Pink* the raging abandon they displayed with Dylan comes through in brief inspired flashes like the fade-out on “Wheels On Fire,” and parts of “Chest Fever” and “To Kingdom Come.” Just enough to let you know they can do it, but never so much that it hits you over the head.

*Big Pink* and all the subsequent Band albums, reveal a group that not only knew what it wanted to do but also knew how to do it. The smallest details have been worked out, but sound fresh and spontaneous.

All the remasters feature “bonus tracks” and while they’re nice to hear, they almost seem unnecessary. The alternate “Tears of Rage” is so close to the

original, that unless you listen closely it's hard to tell the difference, though there are differences like the little piano figure Manuel plays after the first line of the second verse.

Some of the bonus tracks have been previously released either on the two box-set compilations, *To Kingdom Come* and *Across The Great Divide* or on *The Basement Tapes*. Others have been widely bootlegged.

The most curious addition to *Big Pink* is a slightly swingy, upbeat version of "Lonesome Suzie" that as the excellent liner notes by Rob Bowman state, "doesn't work." The original version of the song is so special, and this version so different in feel approach, that perhaps it should have remained unheard.

If *Music From Big Pink* was a masterful introduction, then their second album, *The Band* was their masterpiece. Recorded in a makeshift home studio in a rented house in Los Angeles, this album brought Robertson's penchant for storytelling to fruition. Though all the group's members except for drummer, Levon Helm were Canadian, *The Band* is a remarkably American album—the America of myths, history and stories, and the America of reality. The songs cross the mythical border frequently and often make it indistinguishable. This may have led *Rolling Stone* magazine to later say in its awards issue, "The Band was the only rock and roll group that could've warmed up the crowd for President Lincoln." It was funny but true at the same time.

Robertson who perhaps by default had taken over most of the songwriting occasionally collaborating with other members reached an astonishing level of brilliance, capturing the music from Stephen Foster up through Woody Guthrie Hank Williams and beyond into rock and roll, with stops along the way at every music haven from New Orleans to Chicago to New York and

lyrically evoking writers from Steinbeck and Dos Passos to Mark Twain to Stephen Vincent Benét.

The sound is old and new at once, encompassing every facet of American popular music, and other members of The Band doubled and sometimes tripled on various instruments. In addition to organ and piano, keyboard genius Garth Hudson played saxophone and slide trumpet. Pianist Richard Manuel, played drums, sax and harmonica. Drummer Levon Helm played mandolin and guitar, and bassist Rick Danko played violin and trombone, with co-producer John Simon contributing piano, tuba and horns.

The songs evoked a different time than the autumn of 1969. A simpler, small-town America, with marching bands playing in the town square bandstand, and that evocation made the listener yearn for that simplicity, also knowing full well that it may never have existed. And the lyrical references to old songs whether “Old Virginny” or the mountain ballad “Cripple Creek” enhanced that yearning as magically the songs would bounce back and forth effortlessly between past and present in one timeless swoop. “Up On Cripple Creek” suggests either a traveling musician or perhaps a truck driver, and in “Jemima Surrender,” the singer talks about bring over his Fender (guitar) and playing all night for you. But at the same time, “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down” takes you right back to the Civil War South, and “Across The Great Divide” purely by feel suggests the western frontier.

Most of all, this timelessness is captured in the superb singing and playing. There is not one misplaced note, and Manuel, Helm and Danko, once again tossing the vocals back and forth sing with an unbridled amount of passion.

On an album of all standouts, is it even necessary to pick out the high points when every track has something different to recommend it? There are far

too many to list, but there is the exquisitely beautiful, "Whispering Pines," with Richard's Manuel so-soulful-it's-painful vocal, as Hudson's celestial organ perfectly compliments it. And there is the magnificent, "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down," perhaps their grandest arrangement of any song, with Helm's powerful, yet crying vocal, Manuel's bass notes on the piano cascading into the marching drums, as Robertson's acoustic guitar joins along side while the horns soar on the last chorus. And then there's Rick Danko's vocal on "Unfaithful Servant," and "When You Awake," making you believe he's the boy climbing onto his grandpa's knee in the latter. The most brilliant song of all could well be the closing, "King Harvest (Has Surely Come)." From the funky guitar/organ intro, to Levon Helm low and spooky with the twilight autumn in his voice, singing about the corn in the field while the wind blows 'cross the water and then Richard Manuel leaps in with the utmost urgency telling the plight of the farmer who can't make it no matter what he does, but fights on anyway, and then a drum crack, and Danko's incredibly funky bass lays down a solid groove, augmented by Hudson's eerie organ and Robertson lets loose with what may well be the greatest solo of his career, almost tentative at first, then as the late music critic, Ralph J. Gleason once wrote, "Cracking like a whip."

Again the bonus tracks aren't necessary, and all except "Get Up Jake," previously released as a single are alternate takes of the songs on the album.

The Band's third album *Stage Fright* hit the stores about a year after their second album. Perhaps knowing there was no way they could outdo the second album, *Stage Fright* doesn't even try to be a masterpiece, just an album of songs with no definitive statement. While the album acknowledges some of the historical themes of *Big Pink* and *The Band*, in many ways it was at the time a more contemporary album. By this time The Band had made it. They were selling out concerts in arenas and concert

halls across the country, had been on the cover of *Time*, and played the Ed Sullivan show. The pressures of celebrity, money, fame, touring and having to create were starting to set in. And though Robertson (by *Stage Fright* it was apparent Manuel had pretty much given up all attempts at songwriting on his own) was hardly writing what could be termed “personal” songs, these pressures were alluded to in various songs, particularly the title track and the closing song which followed it, “The Rumor.”

Still not adhering to any typical recording agenda, they recorded the album in the Woodstock NY Playhouse instead of a studio.

More of a “rock” album than its predecessors, *Stage Fright* still managed to pay tribute to the group’s musical influences in various ways and with new touches like Hudson’s Zydeco-flavored accordion on the opening bluesy, “Strawberry Wine.” While the ensemble feel of the group was still very much in evidence, another difference was many of the songs now featured guitar or keyboard solos from Robertson and Hudson.

*Stage Fright* remains underrated only because the Band’s first two albums were so incredible. Two of the songs, the title track and “The Shape I’m In,” received lots of FM airplay but many of the album’s best songs were overlooked.

The standout may well be the Robertson/Manuel collaboration, “Sleeping,” which finds Manuel in a now-familiar role. Manuel starts the song on piano while the rest of the group slowly glides in, picking up the tempo and leading to a soaring Robertson guitar solo. Another overlooked song, also sung by Manuel, is “Just Another Whistle Stop,” another rocker with more stellar Robertson guitar work, great loping bass by Rick Danko and Hudson’s carnival organ sneaking in and out around the melody.



One of the prettiest songs the Band ever recorded, “All La Glory” a lullaby to Robertson’s daughter closed out side one of the original album and feature’s the gentlest vocal Helm ever put on record.

The second half of the album may be even stronger, with the most adventurous song being, “Daniel & The Sacred Harp.” Robertson is once again the story teller, though as Rob Bowman points out in the liner notes, the song while almost a Biblical tale could also be about selling your soul in the music business. The arrangement, as imaginative as anything they ever did, starts out with what sounds like a pump organ leading to an acoustic rhythm guitar, each verse closed by a scratchy fiddle and slide guitar duet. A group that always paid attention to illustrating the lyrics with sound, when Daniel takes the harp and goes high on the hill, Hudson brings that vision to life with a harpsichord.

One of the reasons this particular remaster is so important is that on the previously released CDs that harpsichord was nowhere to be found, and the acoustic rhythm guitar featured a (now gone) flange effect. In the accompanying booklet, there is a “producer’s note” stating there were two mixes done for this album, one by the original engineer, Todd Rundgren (of all people) and the other by British engineer Glynn Johns. Most of the songs on the original LP featured Rundgren mixes, but for some reason when the album was put on compact disc, the Johns mixes were used instead. Another disappointment in the Johns mixes was the sound of Danko’s bass—and this album has some of his best playing—was muffled in the mix. Part of the reason for the sound of Danko’s bass was that on this album he used a fretless bass, the first major player in rock to do so.

The two final songs close the album on a disconsolate note. “Stage Fright,” while upbeat musically is about a man too frightened to go on, but once “he gets to the end, he wants to start all over again.” Danko, in one of his

greatest performances is totally believable, and Hudson shows why he is the greatest keyboard player in all of rock.

“The Rumor” is ominous musically and lyrically. For the first time on this album, the singers share the verses, first Danko, then Helm, with Manuel taking over the chorus with Danko and Helm echoing and harmonizing, reaching an intense peak on the final chorus.

Again the bonus tracks are alternate takes, the most interesting being a stripped-down “Daniel & The Sacred Harp,” with Levon humming the fiddle part, that is obviously a rehearsal take. The last bonus cut and totally unnecessary is a commercial for the album.

After another year *Cahoots*, possibly the strangest album of their career appeared. It was obvious something was going on, just by looking at the cover, which was a very strange painting of the group standing behind a mausoleum, but the images of the group were based on the cover photo of their second album. The album has a harder, colder sound than any of their others, and for the first time, Robertson seems to be struggling lyrically. Some of the songs leave the listener feeling they know what he’s trying to say, but not sure if he’s really saying it. Despite this, the playing and singing remains superb and if certain songs are failures, they are interesting failures.

The opening song, “Life Is A Carnival,” was the only song from the album to stay in the group’s on-stage repertoire and immediately signals a departure in sound. Something of a New Orleans-influenced romp, the song features for the first time, outside musicians, an excellent horn section comprised of New York City studio musicians playing an intriguing arrangement, by New Orleans based singer/songwriter/pianist Allen Toussaint.

The second song immediately shifts gears as Hudson's accordion and Helm's mandolin fade in to take you to Italy with the first Bob Dylan cover since their first album, "When I Paint My Masterpiece." The arrangement may be more masterful than the song. The mandolin and accordion fade out with visions of Venice, into a harsh piano opening for one of the strangest songs The Band ever did, "Last of the Blacksmiths." At first it seems like a revisit to the Americana visions of albums past, but this song is saying that day and perhaps that dream is definitely gone as the somewhat bizarre musical interlude that follows emphasizes. Robertson's lyrics have almost a stream of consciousness feel and the images don't always seem to match up.

This is followed by what also seems a revisit to Americana, but again turns out to be a song of extinction (an underlying theme of the album), "Where Do We Go From Here." This song should've been one of the high points of the record (and I loved it when it first came out) but ultimately it falls short. Something—perhaps what Robertson calls (in the notes), "our voodoo juice" is missing and it ends up being a magnificent failure.

In keeping with the album's title the next song (the last song of side one on the original LP) is "4% Pantomime," a collaboration with Van Morrison, a Woodstock resident at the time. Morrison duets with Manuel, the group's R&B shouter, and their vocal interplay is fantastic. The song itself, while fun, is nothing much to speak of. Manuel and Morrison would duet only one more time (that we know of) and even more successfully at the concert of the original Band's final performance *The Last Waltz* on "Tura Lura Lura (An Irish Lullaby), a performance that while on the soundtrack album, sadly was not included in the movie. I knew Van Morrison when he lived in Woodstock and he talked of wanting to do an album of Ray Charles songs with Manuel, a brilliant idea that never came to pass.

Only two other songs on this album truly stand out (the rest being well played interesting filler, but filler nonetheless) the Manuel-sung ballad, "The Moon Struck One," and the final song, "The River Hymn," with Helm bringing to life a gathering at the river and Hudson contributing beautiful church-like piano. Again this song is yearning for something that is lost, and in it Robertson manages to suggest all the American myths and mysteries he explored previously, but something in this song seems to be saying farewell. The Band would not record another album of original material for four years.

The bonus tracks here are somewhat interesting. First is "Endless Highway," a song they included on their live album with Bob Dylan, *Before The Flood* from their 1974 reunion tour. On that album it was sung by Rick Danko, but here it is by Richard Manuel in a totally different arrangement that makes it a totally different song. The remaining songs are an outtake of "Masterpiece," a studio version of "Baby Don't Do It," the Marvin Gaye hit they made their own on their live album *Rock of Ages*, and for some reason "Bessie Smith" originally issued on their collaboration with Dylan, *The Basement Tapes*. The song, first recorded by Happy & Artie Traum, makes no sense being on this album for in sound and style it obviously from an earlier period.

It is over for The Band now. Other than the remaining remasters, there will be no more new albums, and unless something no one knows about exists in the vaults somewhere, there will be nothing else. The voices of their singers have all been stilled, and in the end their story ended up being as sad and tragic as any in rock and roll. They were easily one of the greatest groups in all of rock and roll, and while they achieved fame and fortune, and critical acclaim and praise from other musicians, they did not receive the wide appreciation, airplay and sales they merited. In comparison to the megastars of today, their fans were a cult following. Perhaps they were too

good. But that as well as the rumors, the feuds, and the endless speculation on the internet are for another time. In the end, it is about the music, and the remasters of that music that finally sound the way they should sound and feel the way they should feel are more than enough reason to revisit and celebrate.